

# THE VISN 5 MIRECC MATTERS

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

*Amy Buchanan*

The recent summer months have brought the newest group of psychology interns to the Baltimore and Perry Point VAMCs as well as the University of Maryland. We've been particularly excited as this year marks the beginning of the new Internship Training Program that incorporates these three sites into one consortium under the direction of **Mark Arenas, PhD**. As part of their training, several interns are taking part in MIRECC research. Interns **Minu Aghevli** and **Melissa Brotman** will be working with **Jean Gearon, PhD**, on her research with women and serious mental illnesses. Working with **John Junginger, PhD**, on developing a typology of psychotic symptoms is intern **Alex Cohen**. **Sarah Morris, PhD**, will be assisted by intern **Erin Heerey** on setting up an electrophysiology laboratory at the Baltimore VA. Intern **Gauri Jaboin** will work with **Sonja Batten, PhD**, on a program evaluation of the Baltimore VA Trauma Program. Joining **Melanie Bennett, PhD**, on her project of developing a smoking cessation program for individuals with serious mental illnesses is intern **Manu Singh**. **Wendy Tenhula, PhD**, will receive assistance from intern **Joanna Strong** on a study of whether social skills training leads to improved work performance among veterans with schizophrenia. Additionally, intern **Mark Testa** joins **Dwight Dickinson, PhD**, in developing a computerized cognitive remediation program for individuals with schizophrenia. A big welcome and congratulations goes out to all of the new interns. We at the MIRECC look forward to working with you all over the next year.

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## SUICIDALITY PRESENTATION A SUCCESS

*Submitted by Amanda Dutton, MSW*

During grand rounds at Baltimore, Perry Point, Washington D.C., and Martinsburg VAMCs this summer, David Jobes, PhD, Professor of Psychology at The Catholic University of America, presented a training entitled "Contemporary Suicidology: From Research to Practice." The presentation covered current, cutting-edge perspectives on clinical practices with suicidal patients. Dr. Jobes gave a brief overview of genetic, neurobiological, and phenomenological research, focusing on the importance of proper assessment and treatment of suicidality among veterans. He reviewed key assessment issues when determining suicidality as well as common risk factors. Dr. Jobes' involvement in phenomenological research of suicidality has led to the development of a meaningful suicide risk assessment instrument that will be used by he and his colleagues. This tool includes initial assessment, treatment planning, tracking and outcome forms. The many attendees appreciated Dr. Jobes' research-informed approach to this very important clinical issue. If you missed this informative presentation, videotapes are available by contacting Howard Schulman at [Howard.Schulman@med.va.gov](mailto:Howard.Schulman@med.va.gov)

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## NEW SCHIZOPHRENIA RESEARCH TRAINING PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

*Submitted by Jack Blanchard, PhD*

The NIMH recently conferred an Institutional National Research Service Award to MIRECC investigator **Jack Blanchard, PhD**, for a Pre-Doctoral Training Program at the University of Maryland, College Park. The renewable 5-year award will support a Schizophrenia Research Training Program (S RTP) at the University of Maryland. The program is designed to develop future schizophrenia researchers capable of translating basic behavioral, cognitive, developmental, and neuroscience principles into research on the psychopathology of schizophrenia.

A cornerstone of the S RTP is the opportunity for Fellows to train with schizophrenia researchers from a range of disciplines and settings. The S RTP integrates training across research labs and participating faculty at the University of Maryland, College Park; the VISN 5 MIRECC; the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Maryland School of Medicine; and the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center (MPRC). Mentors represent a diverse array of schizophrenia research including assessment and diagnosis, detection of risk for the development of schizophrenia, emotion and stress reactivity, ethics, medical comorbidity, neuropsychology, neuropharmacology, neuroimaging, psychophysiology, social impairment and psychosocial remediation, sex differences, substance abuse, trauma and victimization. The support and encouragement of **Anthony Lehman, MD, MPH**, Chair of the Department of Psychiatry UMAB, **Alan S. Bellack, PhD, ABPP**, Director of the VISN5 MIRECC, **William Carpenter, MD**, Director of the MPRC, and individual faculty members was critical in establishing this unique collaborative training program with the College Park campus.

In addition to ongoing research and required courses offered within the APA-accredited Clinical Psychology program in College Park, S RTP fellows will complete courses in the psychopathology of schizophrenia and in treatment approaches to this disorder. Other basic science courses in domains such as psychopharmacology, psychophysiology, development, cognitive science and neuroscience will be selected in consultation with the training director and participating S RTP faculty. An on going seminar on schizophrenia will provide weekly presentations from faculty across campuses involved in the S RTP (e.g., the VISN5 MIRECC and MPRC) as well as eminent scientists from other institutions. For the first year, scheduled speakers already include Elaine Walker, PhD, Dobbs Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, Emory University (neurodevelopmental perspectives on schizophrenia) and Ann M. Kring, PhD, Associate Professor and Director of Clinical Science Program, UC-Berkeley (emotion and psychophysiology in schizophrenia). To round out their research and academic training, S RTP fellows will also complete a clinical externship in severe mental illness at the MIRECC.

The S RTP provides full funding (including tuition, health insurance, support for travel, and stipend) for 3 predoctoral trainees. This year's fellows are Courtney Forbes, Ali Saperstein, and Monica Mann. We look forward to the involvement of all of the dedicated faculty who so generously agreed to participate in the S RTP. With such talented faculty and resources, it is expected that the program at the University of Maryland will become a highly regarded training center for the next generation of schizophrenia researchers.

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## SECOND ANNUAL WOMEN'S CONFERENCE A SUCCESS

*Submitted by Shannon Thomas-Lohrman, MS*

The second annual MIRECC Women's Conference was held on June 9, 2003 at the Sheraton Inner Harbor hotel in Baltimore. This year's focus was Women and Affective Disorders. Over 250 attendees spent the day with several renowned experts in this field, including Katherine Wisner, MD, MS, Western

Psychiatric Institute & Clinic, who addressed "Treatment for Mood Disorders During Pregnancy and Postpartum;" Marlene Freeman, MD, University of Arizona College of Medicine, who presented the latest on "Bipolar Disorder in Women: Emphasis on Reproductive Events;" and Barbara Parry, MD, University of California, who spoke about the "Hormonal Basis of Mood Disorders in Women." After a delicious Italian-themed lunch, the afternoon presenters were Neill Epperson, MD, Yale University, whose topic was "Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder: A Research and Clinical Update" and Ron Honberg, JD, Legal Director, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, who gave a stimulating talk on "Women and Affective Disorders: The Widening Gap Between Law and Psychiatry."

Based on feedback from the attendees, who represented a diversity of disciplines, the material presented at this conference was relevant to their professional goals, up-to-date, and very educational. The speakers were noted to be excellent, the conference was "a great value for the money," and "the content of the conference plus the lunch made for an enjoyable day"!

Next year's conference is already being planned for May 17, 2003 and will address the challenging issues of treating women with substance use disorders. Look for more information in this newsletter (see "Upcoming Events") and at <http://www.va.gov/visn5mirecc/>.

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## PREVENTATIVE HEALTH BEHAVIORS IN WOMEN WITH SMI

*Submitted by Virginia Iannone, PhD*

Patients with severe mental illnesses (SMI) have been shown to suffer from increased mortality as well as lower rates of health promoting behaviors when compared to the general population. Increased rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and smoking have been well documented in the literature, and such studies highlight the health impairments in all patients with SMI. Furthermore, women with SMI have been shown to have higher rates of suicide and obesity when compared to their male counterparts. **Jean Gearon, PhD**, and co-investigator **Virginia Iannone, PhD**, have recently undertaken a study to attempt to illuminate this complex issue by surveying female consumers at the Baltimore VA, the Walter P. Carter Center, and Harbor City Unlimited. The primary purpose of this study is to gather descriptive and frequency data about the preventative health behaviors of women with severe mental illness. The survey includes questions about health-related issues such as frequency of doctor's visits, eating habits, and drug and alcohol use. These data will be compared to data from the general population collected by the Center for Disease Control. Significant findings will be used in preparation for a larger project that will focus on implementing an educational intervention designed specifically for women with SMI.

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## CONGRATS ARE IN ORDER!

MIRECC investigator **Jack Blanchard, PhD**, was recently appointed as the Co-Director of Clinical Training of the Graduate program in Clinical Psychology at the University of Maryland, College Park. Robert Coursey, PhD, joins Dr. Blanchard as the other Co-Director. Additionally, Dr. Blanchard was recently awarded an Institutional National Research Service Award by the NIMH (see article in this issue on the training program funded by this award). Congratulations to Dr. Blanchard on these recent achievements.

Congratulations to **Virginia Iannone, PhD**, for completing her doctoral dissertation, "Evaluation of a Vocational and Therapeutic Riding Program for Severely Emotionally Disturbed Adolescents." Dr. Iannone graduated from Catholic University of America in May of this year with a PhD in Clinical Psychology. She will continue to work at the MIRECC on the Preventative Health Behaviors study, the psycho-education component of Dr. Alan S. Bellack's NIDA treatment study, and the VA Cooperative

Study #494 ("A Randomized Trial of Cognitive Behavioral Treatment for PTSD in Women").  
Congratulations, VJ!

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## **WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS OF THE VISN 5 MIRECC TEAM**

We would like to welcome **Sonja Batten, PhD**, as the new Coordinator of the Trauma Recovery Programs in the VA Maryland Healthcare System and as a MIRECC Investigator. She will oversee the types of treatments offered through both outpatient and residential programs for veterans with PTSD, provide direct patient care, and conduct research on the effectiveness of these programs. Dr. Batten received her PhD in Clinical Psychology from the University of Nevada, Reno, and completed specialized training in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder at the Medical University of South Carolina and at the National Center for PTSD at the VA Boston Healthcare System. We are very excited to have her working with us!

The MIRECC is delighted to welcome **Fran Broomall** as our new Secretary. Fran is a long-time VA employee who recently transferred to the MIRECC from Veterans Canteen Service where she was employed for 10 years as an Administrative Assistant. Fran is located in the front of the MIRECC suite and will be the first person to greet you. In addition to general administrative responsibilities she will assist the MIRECC Education Core in coordinating various educational projects.

**Aaron Murray-Swank, PhD**, joined the MIRECC in August as our first Fellow in Advanced Psychology. Aaron recently completed his internship at SUNY Upstate Medical University and received his PhD in Clinical Psychology from Bowling Green State University. Aaron's research interest is program development and evaluation, with an emphasis on services for families of patients with serious mental illness. Congratulations, Aaron, and welcome to the MIRECC!

**Tameca Jackson, LGSW**, joins the MIRECC as a new Research Assistant. She completed her Master's degree in Social Work at the University of Maryland, Baltimore and worked for several years at Friend's Social Research Center as a supervisor, counselor, and case manager. Tameca will be primarily responsible for recruiting and conducting assessments for MIRECC projects at the Perry Point VAMC. Much of her effort will be focused on Dr. Wendy Tenhula's Generalization in Training for Schizophrenia study.

**Brian Kirkpatrick, MD**, who has worked for a number of years at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, has begun working at the MIRECC as well. His principal clinical research interests are in the heterogeneity of schizophrenia, specifically the hypothesis that schizophrenia is a syndrome that consists of more than one disease, and the problems other than psychosis that people with schizophrenia have. He will also continue laboratory research on the reelin signaling pathway in psychosis.

Additionally, **Gunvant Thaker, MD**, has increased his responsibility as a MIRECC investigator by working part-time at the Baltimore VA. Currently Dr. Thaker is focusing on studying biological markers of schizophrenia with probands and their families at several sites, including the Baltimore VA. Dr. Thaker is Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Maryland, and Chief of the Schizophrenia Related Disorders Program at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center.

**Valene Whittaker, MEd**, has also joined the MIRECC as a Research Assistant. Valene recently completed her Master's in Psychological Services at the University of Pennsylvania, where she worked in the Department of Psychiatry assessing individuals with schizophrenia and related disorders. She will be joining the staff as a therapist and recruiter for an innovative group treatment for substance abuse and schizophrenia. She will also be working on a new family psycho-education component of this program.

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## **UPCOMING EVENTS**

**October 20, 2003**

### **Schizophrenia and Medical Co-Morbidity**

Location: Maritime Institute, Linthicum Heights, MD

*This one-day conference will focus on the assessment and treatment of diabetes and Hepatitis C in patients with schizophrenia. Several national and local experts will address the relationship between diabetes, schizophrenia, and Hepatitis C, as well as management and various treatment options.*

For more information and registration, see [www.chepnic.org](http://www.chepnic.org). Click on the conferences tab, and then on "Schizophrenia and Medical Co-Morbidity." **Register now, as fees go up after October 6th!**

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**November 18, 2003**

### **11<sup>th</sup> Annual Maryland Schizophrenia Conference**

Location: Martin's West in Baltimore, MD

*This one-day conference is sponsored by the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. Topics include smoking cessation for individuals with schizophrenia, the latest research about new generation antipsychotics and their side effects, comorbid medical complications, and barriers to employment for individuals with schizophrenia.*

For more information and registration, see [www.mdschizconf.org](http://www.mdschizconf.org). Please register by November 10, 2003.

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**May 17, 2004**

### **Women and Substance Abuse**

Location: Sheraton Hotel, Baltimore

*This will be the Third Annual Women's Conference planned by the VISN 5 MIRECC. Speakers and topics will be announced as they are confirmed.*

For more information, contact Jean Gearon at [Jgearon@umaryland.edu](mailto:Jgearon@umaryland.edu) or Wendy Tenhula at [Wendy.Tenhula@med.va.gov](mailto:Wendy.Tenhula@med.va.gov).

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**Spring, 2004**

### **Homelessness and SMI: From Streets to Recovery (tentative title)**

Location: Atlantic City, NJ

*This conference is co-sponsored by VISNs 1, 3, 4, and 5 and features a panel of national speakers. More information will be posted as it becomes available.*

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***Fall, 2004***

**Working with Families of Veterans with Mental Illness**

Location: Baltimore, MD

*The MIRECC Education Core is planning a conference for the Fall of 2004 which will focus on the many issues involved in working with families of patients with mental illness.*

For more information, contact Cindy Clark at [Cynthia.Clark@med.va.gov](mailto:Cynthia.Clark@med.va.gov) or 410-605-7298.